How can technology save great apes

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Great apes who are they? “Humans are just like us” is what the great apes, would say in reply! After all we share the same internal structure largely i.e. 98% DNA of chimpanzees, bonobos and humans are same. Gorilla and orangutans relate closely behind. If they were to ask us a question it would be, “we are so similar internally then how you are so different externally in your interaction with us”. Human response (generalized) would be we have a developed lifestyle, we use refreshing palm oil based soaps; carryout oil exploration to fuel cars; forest logging for furniture; reward ourselves regretfully (not really) consuming bushmeat; for recreation and show of elitism carryout trophy hunting. Alarming concerns against this rampant wrong doing and implementation of conservation measures prompted by a few good people are preventing further slippage of the Red List status for these close relatives of ours.

Wildlife monitoring and tracking using sophisticated gadgetry is proving useful in conservation efforts of the threatened species, especially the umbrella species. Our intelligent close relatives are found only in tropical forests of Africa and Asia. Their misery is compounded as all the countries home to them are under developed and/or conflict stricken.

Extreme high intelligence which the great apes possess could be used to find novel methods, which they could use for their defense and stay safe. Lexigram the representation of word with figure and symbols is maturing as a language for the great apes to interact with us. Captive bonobos recognize lexigrams running in hundreds on tablet PC at Great Ape Trust. If the apes could be trained in the wild with lexigram for unexpected situations say fire (symbol already there), which hopefully they would attentively listen in maximum likelihood! They could do some responsive action similar to pressing a button on the tablet pc in captive, this could issue alerts for the concerned agencies and save them.

The above approach was more of augmented reality based, there are other technological approaches which could go a long way. Fitting GPS tracking equipment on commercial heavy vehicles (concealed and temper proof) could help keep a track of vehicles moving in prohibited areas. Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP-UNEP) could certainly make this legally mandatory bringing member states with great apes inhabitants and other stakeholders on board. Arterial roads could have pressure sensors randomly placed to determine number of vehicles passing; also there could be remote camera activation to capture the number plate and so on. This can help keep an eye on tree logging and human-vehicle traffic movement.

Lastly something of personal interest to me, setting up sensor networks which span across large areas of the forest with sensor nodes sprayed from an aircraft. This way there could be multiple ‘eyes’ on the great apes spread everywhere, randomly, which would send all useful information needed by concerned agencies remotely. Similar to corporate social responsibility, we have social relative responsibility towards great apes. We have to fulfill it.